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Drug war goes airborne

Better radar, aircraft sought for nabbing smugglers

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Federal officials are expected late this month to approve greatly expanded efforts to close America's borders to drug smugglers.

A major target of the federal crackdown will be clandestine airplane flights into the United States by smugglers.

Thousands of planes carrying drugs secretly fly into the US every year by flying around, or under, radar detection systems. Officials say the aerial smugglers are responsible for about two-thirds of the cocaine brought into this country.

Several members of Congress have been pushing hard for new equipment to close the gaps in US radar coverage. One plan calls for about half a dozen large, radar-equipped balloons to be suspended along the border with Mexico, where many drug flights originate.

Congressional sources say that next Friday the National Drug Enforcement Policy Board will probably act on a wide range of options to expand antidrug operations. The proposals are understood to call for a larger military role in the effort to intercept drug shipments.

The policy board is chaired by Attorney General Edwin E. Meese III. It includes a number of other Cabinet officers, as well as William J. Casey, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

The US security system against drug smugglers along the Southern border is described as "severely inadequate" by officials in Congress and in the Reagan administration. One close observer describes the situation this way:

"You could fly a 10-story building anywhere across the southwest border of the US at 14,000 feet without getting picked up by any radar."

Another federal official puts it more simply: The US is "as naked as a newborn baby."

Problems are worst in the West and Southwest, but the situation is also considered serious in the arc of states from Virginia to Florida to Texas.

Government investigators say that at least 2,500 illegal drug flights, and perhaps more, entered the US during the past year. Only 250 of those were interdicted by federal agencies. In some cases, the smugglers were caught only because their aircraft crashed.

The drug flights originate in South and Central America, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, and Mexico. Some are long-range aircraft that can fly from South America all the way to Montana or Wyoming without refueling. Pilots earn as much as

\$100,000 per flight.

The drug flights are also major sources of marijuana and heroin.

Against this fleet of drug invaders, the US government has thrown its relatively puny civilian air force, under the command of such agencies as the US Customs Service.

It's an unequal contest. Often the drug-running planes can fly faster, farther, and higher than federal aircraft. So even when drug-smuggling planes are spotted, they are often able to escape. But in most cases, federal agents can't even find the drug-carrying aircraft as they move into US territory.

There are many stories of poorly equipped federal officials, without radar or other modern devices, trying to spot or track smuggler aircraft with only the use of binoculars.

One idea gaining support on Capitol Hill is to press the air arm of the National Guard into service. Recent hearings before the House Government Operations subcommittee on information, justice, and agriculture heard a proposal to use Air National Guard units operating out of West Virginia, Georgia, Texas, and California in an effort to spot smugglers.

Guard aircraft would be equipped with high-powered radar to patrol large sectors of coastline and border regions from the northern border of Virginia, around the southern half of the country, and up to the northern border of California.

The National Drug Enforcement Policy Board meeting next week is expected to deal with several other proposals that have strong support in Congress and have apparently won the approval of Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger. Among them:

- Aerostat radars. Large, helium-filled balloons would be suspended along the Mexican border, along the Florida coast, and in the Bahamas. From these balloons would be hung powerful radar systems able to

detect low-flying aircraft as much as 150 miles away.

The balloons would be placed at an altitude of 10,000 to 12,000 feet along favorite entry points of drug smugglers. Three of these Aerostats have already been tried in Florida and the Bahamas and have "knocked the socks off" drug smugglers in those corridors, one observer says. Another is under construction in Arizona.

One benefit of the Aerostats is that they will be able to look 150 miles into Mexico, where US officials say smugglers have a large number of secret landing strips.

● **New aircraft.** Ten C-130 aircraft, specially equipped with high-powered F-15 fighter-plane radar, would be pressed into service from the military services to fill in the gaps between the Aerostats.

● **New radar.** US Customs now flies four P-3A aircraft, leftover surplus from the US Navy. These would be upgraded to include powerful radar similar to that used on the E-2C Navy reconnaissance plane.

● **Military unit transfer.** The 302nd Special Operations Squadron of the Air Force, including some aircraft now in Oregon, would be moved close to the Mexican border in Arizona to supplement Customs forces there. The unit's equipment includes C-130s and helicopters.

● **Other aircraft.** At least two C-130s equipped with powerful electronic equipment would be dispatched to areas close to South America where they could give early intelligence about drug flights and help US-based units prepare a "welcoming committee" for drug runners.

All of this comes at a time when the Customs air wing, long poorly equipped, is also getting other equipment.

Customs already has on loan from the Army eight high-speed Blackhawk helicopters with which agents can follow smuggler flights and swoop down upon the planes when they land. The idea, says a Customs official, is to "be there when they open the doors of their plane."

Customs has also obtained six twin-jet Citations, and it is in the process of buying eight twin-turboprop, long-range tracker aircraft from Piper.

The stepped-up efforts against drug-smuggling can be attributed in large part to the work of various members of Congress.

Among the strong supporters have been Rep. Glenn English (D) of Oklahoma, Rep. Dan Daniel (D) of Virginia, Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D) of Arizona, and Sen. Pete Wilson (R) of California.

"It's the most bipartisan issue I've seen in more than 10 years on the Hill," one Senate staff member says.